

Aurora's Gamble

One

Thick with aether, the aarena swelled and rippled. The battle had gone on too long. “Scythe! The right flank is exposed!” *Damn their incompetence.* Aurora smelled another aether storm generating from the Einstein Scientific Society (ESS) gladiator. As usual, neither of her teammates were in position to counter it. *Forget them.*

Thrusting her spear into the metallic surface of the aarena, Aurora activated its internal engine and held on. The spear’s full length extended. While nearly ripping her arms out of socket, the stunt vaulted her behind the nearest barrier wall before the storm crackled across the entire quadrant.

“Scythe! Thunder?” She pinched her nose against the spent aether and popped her head out for a quick assessment. *Tears of God.* Nothing remained of her teammates but a wafting blue vapor.

Of all the pathetic...

“Aurora, what the hell game you playing out there?”

Aurora turned an icy glare toward Freezer, her aether master. His rickety boat occupied the southern dock of the floating aether rig. The challenging aether master occupied the northern dock less than thirty meters from her position. Freezer’s boat hung low in its restraints. They were losing.

“Stop running and get into the fight! Self-righteous wench, you just let those wankers smoke my best two gladiators.”

That was the final straw. Fuming, Aurora slammed her spear into her shoulder harness and fired up its aether portal. Freezer wasn’t going to like her tapping into his reserves. But Freezer was a timid moron and a heathen.

Using her free arm, she swung on top of the wall and located the ESS opponent cowering behind an INCquisition swordsman twenty meters distant. The fools thought they’d be safer together.

“God ordains it!” Springing from the wall, Aurora hailed a beam of burning aether from the cannon on Freezer’s boat. Using the portal in her spear, she directed the beam into the swordsman’s chest.

His gurgling scream gave way to a cloud of blue mist. As Aurora hit the ground and rolled, the trailing end of the beam blossomed into a broader eruption and consumed the retreating ESS storm-bug as well.

Aurora’s grin fell slack when she realized she’d neglected the third enemy gladiator—a pirate favoring mortar and shield. The whoomp of a shell leaving the tube spurred her forward.

After a single stride, the surface of the aarena shook. The square she'd just occupied, flared hot. The shockwave rammed into the base of her spine and thrust her toward the enemy boat.

Aurora crashed into the cold surface of the aarena. Numbness set in. All but her sense of sight and smell dissolved. Her sight told her the enemy boat lay only five meters distant. The crackle of aether plugging Aurora's nostrils told her the dispatched gladiators were regenerating.

I'll do this myself.

Gripping her spear, Aurora staggered to the edge of the northern dock. Without time for doubt, she launched herself over thin air. The moment her spear splintered the hull of the enemy boat, she unleashed its full extension. The vessel shuttered as her spear tore through the engine room and into the open air on the far side of the dock.

Instantly, Aurora retracted the lance and tumbled back to the aarena's surface.

Dead in the sky, the vessel listed hard to starboard and broke its restraints. The match had ended—the contract granted to the victor.

Yet Aurora felt no sense of glory. Instead of the victor being her beloved Children of God, it was a sniveling aether master known as Freezer. She wiped a smudge of grease from her spear as she strode across the aarena.

Freezer stepped from his boat to confront her before she could climb onboard. "I hope you realize your antics today cost me more aether than this contract is worth."

"If I didn't have to—" Aurora swallowed her words as the regenerated Scythe and Thunder strode up behind her.

"One more chance, Spear Maiden." Freezer disappeared inside the boat, yammering as he went. "You're lucky I don't cut you loose here and now, of all the *shintsu*..."

After Scythe and Thunder followed Freezer onboard, Aurora shook her head. "There's no such thing as luck."

Two

“Absolutely no weapons beyond this point. No exceptions.”

Aurora Teller read the hastily-penned sign above the swinging doors out loud. She felt naked without her spear. The door’s wooden slats permitted the sounds and smells of the audition to drift into the hall. She gagged on the mixed odor of fresh blood and stale rice wine.

Aurora glanced again at the sign.

The red paint didn’t look dry. Nothing in this backwash sky city was dry. She attempted for the fifth time to fluff her white shock of hair to life. The cursed humidity added two pounds of stress on her neck.

Why had she ventured this far from the central aarena—to the floating outpost of Hong Gai? Here, the name Aurora Teller meant nothing. She was neither the frontier girl from Yellowknife nor the more recently made over poster child for the Children of God.

Her opponents knew her as the Spear Maiden. Unfortunately, she’d faced only six opponents thus far in her yet to burgeon career as an aether gladiator. Precisely this need for more and better opponents had brought her to these doors.

“I’ve made up my mind,” she said to no one.

Her current aether master was a borderline junkie, and his roster...Aurora rolled her eyes. Not one served as a worthy sparring partner. She had to aim higher.

“God ordains it, and God cannot be thwarted.” She smoothed the sleeves and tail of her multi-layered, sky blue robes. All but the innermost garment had been stitched from a sheer yet tensile silk harvested from worms exposed to aether. Finally, she slashed her hands outward. Tightening her fists, she slammed open the doors.

The tavern had been emptied of chairs to accommodate a half dozen fighting rings—the nearest one currently empty. In fact the entire room lacked the crowd she had anticipated. No matter.

She scanned the gawking faces of the lowlifes who’d come for free entertainment and cheap drinks. Among them, a fellow dressed simply in Western leathers caught her eye. Seated toward the back, his smile strived to indicate they knew each other. She dismissed the impossibility out of hand.

In the center of the room she spotted her targets. Du Sang and Flounder represented the two most reputable aether masters on the docket. They were the reasons she’d ventured to the sky city of Hong Gai.

Flounder had reached the prime time once—a step removed from the central aarena on the largest aether rig of all. Purportedly, the aether master had floundered. The name stuck. Some say he never got over the prime time loss that paralyzed his left side.

Aurora didn’t care. Half a Flounder was better than the picked-over fish skeleton she’d been fighting for. Determined to make her mark, she strode toward the central ring where a waif of a girl and a local villager trained in wushu were sparring.

Aurora’s billowing robes doubled her presence. Flying over the top rope, she interrupted the fight. “Don’t mean to be rude, but I haven’t the time or temperament to wait in line.”

Three

“Then I’ll kick your ass now, princess.” The waif took offense at the interruption.

Gladly, Aurora targeted her first. Arching her back and bending in half, she dodged a sloppy jab. The moment before placing her hands on the mat, she untethered her feet and caught the girl beneath the chin with a boot.

Using the lunging arm of the villager for added stability, Aurora planted a windmill kick on the girl’s right ear. The waif’s eyes rolled into her head as she dropped limply to the mat. In a singular motion, Aurora reestablished her feet and tugged the villager over her shoulder.

Rather than sprawling to the mat, the middle-aged man rolled gracefully onto his feet and crouched at the ready before the tail of Aurora’s fluttering robes settled.

She grinned. “Good. Finally a worthy opponent.” Through the corner of her eye, she noticed Flounder and Du Sang shifting their audience away from the ring, unwilling to give her a chance. Her smile faded. “Busboy.”

The busboy looked up from his mopping.

“Your mop, now.” Aurora’s tone gave him little option to resist.

He rushed the instrument to her immediately.

Aurora snapped off the end before snapping it again and tossing half to the villager. “Banshay?”

The villager clutched the short stick and nodded.

This was Aurora’s opportunity to shine. This stick was nothing compared to her spear, but it gave her focus. Charging, she slashed a quick blow from her wrist.

The villager blocked. Aiming for her throat with his free hand, he struck at her side with the stick.

Stick to stick, she countered the strike. Spinning away from his empty hand, she saw her opening—his kidneys. Using her body to block his counter, she stabbed his side with the rounded butt of her stick while sweeping his legs. As he fell, she positioned her knee on his chest and drove him into the mat.

Breathless and stunned, the villager lost his weapon.

Aurora shifted the grip on her stick and thrust it downward jagged end first. She stopped the kill shot short of the man’s heart.

He closed his eyes and fell slack, acknowledging defeat.

Exultant, Aurora stood. But the thrill of victory lodged in her throat as she turned to see both Du Sang and Flounder engaged with a portly representative of the INCquisition faction. *No one, aether master or not, turns their back on the Spear Maiden.* “Master Flounder!”

The two masters continued their conversation. Only the sweaty INCquisition vulture looked up.

Aurora didn’t wait for acknowledgment. “What exactly is it you’re looking for in a gladiator if not the irrepressible ability to win?”

Slowly, Flounder turned his head. The effort forced him to shift his good leg awkwardly while supporting himself with his ivory handled cane.

Du Sang askewed the brim of his cavalier style hat.

Aurora continued, “I’ll beat every fighter in this room if it’s the only way to get your attention.”

“What’s your weapon in the aarena, little cherub?” Half of Flounder’s face remained limp as he spoke, forcing him to slur his words.

“I’m the Spear Maiden, not a cherub. Or has your drooping eye blinded you from the truth?”

Du Sang sniggered before regaining his composure.

Flounder blinked for such a long span of time Aurora thought he might have fallen asleep on his feet. Finally he raised his droopy lids. “Never send an angel to do a devil’s job.”

An inhuman cackle burst into Aurora’s ears like omnidirectional static. Her body awareness told her the threat came from behind. The hairs in her nose fused together as the air thickened with the scent of expired aether—a junkie.

Four

Aurora's limited exposure to aether junkies hadn't prepared her for the repulsiveness or intensity of what confronted her next. The painted mask and jester's hood did nothing to hide the monster.

For an extended moment the junkie stood still, then wrenched open its jaw violently. Instead of human speech, it shook with a cross between laughter and lust. In mid-cackle, the junkie launched a fork of bony fingers for Aurora's throat.

Staggering backwards, she failed to block the blow. Electricity shot through her neck and shoulders. Her eyes swam as she fumbled lamely to counter.

A boney forearm crushed her jaw and lifted her from the mat.

On the way down, the terrible laughter echoed from inside her head. Driven into the mat by the full weight of the junkie, her awareness fluttered. All sensation save the laughter receded, replaced by darkness.

Then the weight lifted. The cackling laughter withdrew like an ocean's tide exposing a barren beach. Slowly Aurora opened her eyes.

The junkie had gone.

In his absence, Aurora felt something blossom in her gut worse than physical pain. Failure. She'd been beaten. Worse, she'd been embarrassed. By a thing more aether than human.

Dizzy and straining for breath, she rose to her knees. Her slight audience, along with her chance of betterment, had gone. Flounder, Du Sang, even the lesser masters.

Without a sound, she swung herself over the ropes. Her jaw throbbed from the mild exertion. She should have never come this far east. She should have kept to the European and American rigs—where the Children of God were at least recognized if not respected.

Gingerly, she made her way across the nearly empty room. For the first time she felt the sponginess of the swollen wood planks beneath her feet. She smelled a hint of something sacred and ancient—the ghost of terra firma still present in the debauched floating city.

Desire flared within her. With increased urgency, she scuttled toward the open air end of the room until she reached the railing. Eyes closed, ignoring the screaming pain in her ribs, she drank in the odors. Finally, she gazed over the edge.

At first she saw nothing but an ocean of grey clouds gliding beneath the anchored city. "Please, God."

A flash passed too quickly for her to be sure. Then a larger expanse opened directly beneath her. Blue water, spotted with tiny white crests, caressed the jagged edge of a rock jutting upward like the knee of a giant sleeping beneath the waters.

The blanket of clouds swallowed the sight a second later. But Aurora had seen it. God had granted her mercy. The rest she could take on faith.

She exhaled and rested her bruised face in her hands. Why had God allowed her to be defeated in the first place? Hadn't he ordained this path for her life? Entering the audition had invalidated her previous contract with Freezer. Now she had nothing.

"Why the tears in your beer, princess? You still got that fancy gown."

Aurora spun to confront the waif.

The red-haired girl rubbed her chin and grinned. "After all, one good knock deserves another."

Five

“Name’s Bloody Mary, and I’d like to know how the hell you danced on my chin earlier.” Mary extended a hand.

Aurora couldn’t think of any reason not to be friendly. She met the handshake lightly.

Mary squeezed as if cracking walnuts.

Aurora straightened. “Honestly, the more practical move would have been to use your momentum against you, choke you and then throw you into that wretched villager. I suppose the backflip was for show.”

Mary shrugged it off. “With the fancy gown and all, I can’t say I blame ‘ya.”

“While the outfit is mostly for the audience, at times it masks my movements from the opponent as well.”

Mary rested her forearms on the railing and stared into the floating myriad of dragon boats linked together to form Hong Gai. “I’m barely worth a frog’s fart in these damn auditions. Without my launcher—” she shook her head. “Where did you learn to fight like that? I was trying to gather scraps from that local fellow before you spilled his learning like moonshine from a cracked jug.”

Aurora relaxed. “At first from books and films, until I found a sifu.”

“A what?”

“A teacher—Indian or Burmese, or some such place. He and his family relocated to Lost Angels when he converted to Children of God.”

“Ah.” Mary chuckled. “That explains the getup.”

Aurora narrowed her eyes. “And what explains *your* getup. I’m afraid I can’t place it.”

“I’m a clanker, mostly.”

“Mostly?”

Mary shrugged. “I float with pirates a lot.”

But I thought clankers and pirates—”

“Not usually. But I find the arrangement advantageous for work.” Mary spit over the railing.

“Oh?” Aurora raised a brow. “And what sort of work has brought you to Hong Gai?”

Mary shook her head. “Make no mistake, sister. I can scuttle a boat from two kilometers or burn the wings off a fly from three paces. I came here hoping someone could learn me to fight like you—with nothing but fists and fury.”

“Apparently I still have much to learn.”

Mary waved her off. “Don’t let Harlequin get to you.”

“Who?”

“The AJ that smoked you in the ring. Hell, he’d just as likely tear off his own arm to shake hands with himself.”

Aurora shivered despite Hong Gai being anchored below 1000 meters. She let the rippling, red sails of the dragon junks mesmerize her in an effort to wipe her memory of the junkie. “It’s terrible what aether does when it’s abused like that.”

“To each his own.” Mary hopped up and sat on the railing.

Aurora flinched protectively.

“If you’re planning on hanging around, I know of a good dojo. I’ll pay if you’ll be my snafu.”

“Sifu.” Aurora shook her head and then thought twice. “Sure, why not? I had hoped to procure a contract and ship out immediately. I suppose I blew that.”

“Before you jump overboard and go ripples, you might want to check in with Captain Tight Pants over there.”

“Who?”

“The guy with the body guard the size of a gorilla. He’s been looking this way often enough to string together a motion picture of our conversation.” Mary pointed with her chin.

Aurora squinted toward a dark interior corner of the tavern. The busboy had already begun breaking down the nearest ring. “Is he really a captain?”

“The register listed him as a master and captain of a mid-sized junk.”

“That guy’s a master? With what faction?”

“None.”

Aurora sighed. “Great, a loner. The only guy interested in me, and he’s probably looking for a secretary or a maid.”

Mary slapped Aurora in the buttocks. “I’d play maid to his butler, if you know what I mean.”

“God forbid it!”

“Hey,” Mary threw up her hands, “so you’re not into squeezing the fruit. At least hear what his eyes have been wandering on about. I’ll be at the bar if you need me.”

Six

“You don’t belong here.” The unaffiliated captain hailed Aurora from the shadows.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve been watching.”

Grinding her teeth, Aurora stepped close enough to see the captain’s eyes—one of them sea foam and angry, the other as brown and warm as terra firma. “I made a mistake, that’s all.”

“I wasn’t talking about that *shintsu* junkie.”

“Then what are you talking about? And you better not be preparing to reference my female form in any manner, lewd or otherwise.”

The man-gorilla seated next the captain choked on the dead cigar clenched in his teeth.

Aurora pegged him as a clanker.

Recovering, the burly best man slapped the captain on the shoulder hard enough to dislodge dental fillings. “You’re losing your touch, old man.”

“I’m not, I haven’t lost,” the captain threw his hat on the table. “Who are you calling old?”

His over-sized cohort shrugged.

After running his hand through his hair, the captain shook out his shoulders and addressed Aurora. “I was attempting to preserve a little mystique, that’s all. But obviously I’ve misjudged your tolerance for such showmanship from anyone other than yourself.”

Aurora didn’t blink. “Are you or are you not an aether master?”

The captain nodded. “I am.”

“Very well. I am an aether gladiator in need of a master.” Aurora glanced around the room. “It appears as if you are the only one remaining, therefore the best one remaining.”

“You figured that all on your own?” The captain said.

“She makes a solid argument, boss.”

“Can it, Floyd.”

The clanker bared his teeth.

Aurora ignored their banter. “I’ll admit I’m inexperienced, but I can fight better than anyone else you’ll meet this far from the central aarena.”

“Can you now?” The captain stroked his chin. “I suppose that includes old Crank here?” He turned to his partner. “I believe this young lady just challenged you to a duel, Crank.”

“I reckon so.” The man-gorilla began an epic battle to extricate himself from the booth where he’d gotten himself jammed.

“As a matter of fact,” the captain continued, “I recall hearing something about you not having the giblets to stand in the same ring.”

“No need to get colorful in front of the lady.” Reaching his tolerance level, Crank snapped the edge of the table off in his hand and stood.

“My apologies.” Without standing, the captain bowed politely toward Aurora. “I suppose if I’m to offer you a contract, a demonstration is in order.”

Aurora stretched her arms over her head and crouched. “All I have to do is best your man?”

Crank choked on his cigar again, then decided to place it on the table.

“Best my man?” The captain shook his head. “Of all the *shintsu*,” he looked to Crank. “This girl actually thinks you’re going to fight, and she’s gonna win!”

“I’ve already gotten up, so someone better do something.” Crank raised his guard. The moment he did, Aurora aimed a punch directly at his throat.

Seven

Crank closed the opening, using his forearms like a vice.

Aurora barely removed her hand before he crushed it.

“Women always go straight for the soft parts.” Crank lowered one hand as if anticipating a knee to the groin.

“And men think it funny to crack their knuckles on a jaw.” Aurora launched a swift kick at the hulk’s thigh. Her foot glanced off as if she were attacking a side of cured buffalo.

“She’s got a point there,” the captain said.

“It is on occasion hilarious,” Crank added.

Aurora jabbed him in the gut. Her fist thunked against the man’s thick hide without effect.

Crank continued his plodding shuffle around their make-shift ring.

Aurora drove home a combination of punches and chops followed by a roundhouse.

Crank caught the roundhouse with his upper arm.

Aurora stumbled backwards as her energy rebounded in the opposite direction.

“I hearsay you prefer a spear in the aarena.” The captain continued the interview.

Aurora fired a impotent jump kick. “I *am* the Spear Maiden,” she huffed.

“I know who you are, Aurora Teller from Yellowknife.” The Captain rested his elbows on the table.

Aurora stopped cold. “Just tell me what I need to do to get this contract, short of kicking your man in his oversized giblets.”

“You wouldn’t.” Crank lowered his guard further.

“I could have already.” Aurora tilted her head. A split second later, she delivered a stabbing front kick.

Crank caught her heel.

Pushing upward, Aurora straddled his neck and shoulders. Wrapping one leg around the other, she squeezed.

“Boss,” Crank choked on the word while blinded by Aurora’s flowing garment. He flailed his arms, but his muscle bound shoulders prevented him from reaching behind his head with both hands at once. “Get her off me.”

The captain slapped the table. “And cut short the best damn entertainment I’ve had all season?”

Crank’s shoulders sagged. “I think...I’m gonna...pass out.”

“Alright, that’s enough.” The captain tapped Aurora on the back.

She jabbed at his face with an elbow.

He caught her arm, wrenched her off Crank and slammed her onto the table. “Enough! For St. Quentin’s sake. You made your point, and with a little more flare than I dare say Crank is accustomed to.”

Crank rested his hands on his knees. “You don’t pay me enough for this.”

“I don’t pay you anything.”

“Like I said.”

“So do I have the contract or not?” Aurora insisted.

“Answer me one thing. If I like what I hear, you get the contract.” The captain offered her his hand.

Aurora slapped it away. "Ask."

"When Mary asked you to show her some of your moves, did you agree?"

Aurora shot a gaze across the tavern.

Mary raised a glass in salute from the bar.

"She's with you?"

"Not really." The captain shrugged. "We work together sometimes. Mary can't handle family more than a week at a time."

"Family?"

"That's what this interview is about, Ms. Teller. And I'm still awaiting your answer."

"What answer?"

"Did you agree to help Mary?"

Slowly Aurora nodded. "She said she knew of a dojo."

"Then you've got yourself a contract on my boat, if you'll have it."

Aurora straightened her robes. "I don't even know your name."

Crank interrupted. "Mary didn't tell you? It's Captain Tight Pants."

The captain stepped closer to Aurora. "Did I mention Crank's real name?"

"Alright, alright. I relent." Crank ambled toward the bar.

"The name's Gamble."

Aurora raised a brow. "Your real name?"

"My mama said she rolled the dice on my father and lost, but the consolation was the best thing she could have hoped."

"That's sorta sweet, I guess."

Gamble put an arm around Aurora's shoulders.

She shrugged it off. "Not that sweet."

He started toward the bar without her. "When folk used to ask about the name, she'd say, 'Win or lose, I always gotta' gamble.' Welcome aboard my boat, Ms. Teller. For all our sakes, I hope this gamble pays off."

Aurora allowed herself a smile. She was hoping the same thing.